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**NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY**  
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**US Counter-Islamic State Strategy: It Could Be Worse**

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**United States Counter-ISIL Strategy: It Could Be Worse**

**by Sean E. Lowe, Lieutenant Colonel, United States Air Force**

This paper is submitted to the Faculty of the Joint Advanced Warfighting School in partial satisfaction of the requirements of a Master of Science Degree in Joint Campaign Planning and Strategy. The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Joint Forces Staff College or the Department of Defense.

This paper is entirely my own work except as documented in footnotes. (or appropriate statement per the Academic Integrity Policy)

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## Abstract

Islamic State (IS) is not the first extremist organization to combine violent acts with territorial control. But unlike previous Jihadist groups, IS has established the framework of a proto-state, with a unique combination of political acumen, *takfiri* jihadism, brutal but effective governance, and a credible conventional combat capability. And unlike other Jihadists groups, like al Qaeda, IS is not simply a hyper violent terrorist organization. Moreover, its source of strength does not stem from a charismatic leader or an attractive ideology, but rather the broader regional sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia. In response to this perceived existential terrorist threat, President Obama launched a US counter-IS campaign in September 2014. This counter-IS strategy, which aimed to *degrade, and ultimately destroy, IS through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy*, fit neatly within the broader and long held GWOT strategic construct. Yet, by disregarding the Arab-Persian regional rivalry that fuels the Sunni-Shia divide and enabled IS to rise, the Obama administration discounted the central political problem of returning Sunni-Shia divide to non-violent relations, and instead applied a military-centric counterterrorism solution. This paper asserts that the emergence of IS is a manifestation of a broader Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict. Without mitigating this conflict as the primary driver enabling the IS proto-state, the current US military strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy IS is unlikely to achieve US political objectives. This Sunni-Shia violent strife results from the combination of weak governments pursuing sectarian policies and external state actors attempting to influence internal political factors for larger strategic ends. IS is both the result of this political environment and a manifestation of the essential problem, but not the problem itself.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

The US invasion of Afghanistan marked the beginning of a 16 year, \$1.7 trillion global campaign to defeat al-Qaeda and its franchises.<sup>1</sup> Yet, after toppling three regimes and waging multiple counterterrorism operations throughout the Middle East and Africa, violent extremism continues to spread, gaining favor with a new generation of jihadists and metastasizing in conflict zones throughout the globe.<sup>2</sup> Though al-Qaeda's senior leadership was decimated in Afghanistan, and al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) has been significantly degraded, new and more powerful extremist groups emerged. The latest jihadist-entrepreneur, Islamic State (IS), rose from the ashes of AQI in 2010, gaining surprising state-like power, while altering the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and posing a direct threat to US national security and regional stability.<sup>3</sup>

This thesis asserts that the emergence of IS is a manifestation of a broader Sunni-Shia sectarian conflict. Without mitigating this conflict as the primary driver enabling the IS proto-state, the current US military strategy to degrade and ultimately destroy IS is unlikely to achieve US political objectives.

### **US Policy Towards Islamic State**

Modern Islamic terrorism, defined as groups professing Islamic motivations, while seeking political aims through violence, can be traced back to Islamic jihadist

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<sup>1</sup> Shannon N. Green and Keith Proctor, "Turning Point: A New Comprehensive Strategy for Countering Violent Extremism," *CSIS Report* (November 2016):16, [https://csis-ilab.github.io/cve/report/Turning\\_Point.pdf](https://csis-ilab.github.io/cve/report/Turning_Point.pdf) (accessed February 27, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>3</sup> Assaf Moghadam, "The Jihadist Entrepreneur: What the Anjem Choudary Case Can Teach Us," *War on the Rocks* (September 2016):1, <https://warontherocks.com/2016/09/the-jihadist-entrepreneur-what-the-anjem-choudary-case-can-teach-us/> (accessed February 27, 2017).

organizations of the 1960s. Exploiting new global communication and transportation networks, these extremist organizations adopted terrorism strategies to achieve their political goals.<sup>4</sup> Bombing, kidnappings, hijackings and shootings dominated Middle East politics during the 1970's and 1980's.<sup>5</sup> The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan provided Sunni jihadist groups a ready proving ground and a deep reserve of trained militants, prepared to lead the next generation of Islamic extremists. Al Qaeda emerged after the 1991 Gulf War, fueled by US enmity, and focused on striking the West outside of the Middle East. These efforts manifested themselves as the terror attacks on September 11, 2001.

After 9/11, the Bush administration adopted the metaphor "Global War on Terror" (GWOT) to describe the open-ended counterterrorism effort required to defeat al Qaeda.<sup>6</sup> GWOT dominated US foreign policy during the Bush and Obama administrations. Drone strikes and Special Forces raids became the main effort of the US counterterrorism strategy throughout the Middle East and South Asia. John Brennan, President Obama's CIA Director, pledged a multigenerational campaign against al Qaeda and its affiliates, and by 2009 the GWOT target list expanded from Afghanistan to al Qaeda's terrorist franchises in North Africa, Yemen, and Somalia.<sup>7</sup> Consequently, when IS first captured Washington's attention in the summer of 2014, the Obama administration viewed it

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<sup>4</sup> John Moore, "The Evolution of Islamic Terrorism: An Overview," *Frontline* (2014), <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/target/etc/modern.html> (accessed February 27, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Scott Wilson and Al Kamen, "Global War on Terror is Given New Name," *The Washington Post* (March 25, 2009), <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/24/AR2009032402818.html> (accessed February 27, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Scott Shane, Mark Mazzetti, and Robert F. Worth, "Secret Assault on Terrorism Widens on Two Continents," *The New York Times* (August 2010), <https://www.globalpolicy.org/war-on-terrorism/49396.html?itemid=49396> (accessed February 27, 2017).

through the lens of a terrorist organization. This perspective was both coherent and wrong.

Arguably, IS appeared like a terror group. Baghdadi shared al Qaeda's ideology, rhetoric, and long term goals.<sup>8</sup> The two organizations even shared an early alliance. Moreover, by killing American journalists and targeting Arab civilians, to incite wide spread fear, IS clearly acted like a terrorist group.<sup>9</sup> Prior to launching a counter-IS campaign in September 2014, President Obama linked IS with al Qaeda by stating "ISIL is a terrorist organization, pure and simple."<sup>10</sup> President Obama then approved this counter-IS strategy, within the broader GWOT construct, to "degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy."<sup>11</sup> This characterization of IS as a terrorist group, fits nicely within the long held strategic approach of GWOT. Yet, by disregarding the Arab-Persian regional rivalry that fuels Sunni-Shia strife and enabled IS to rise, the Obama administration confounded the essential political problem of returning Sunni-Shia divide to non-violent relations, and misapplied a military-centric solution.

### **US Goals to Defeat Islamic State**

As of April 2017, the US has deployed over 5,000 American troops to the Middle East in support of counter-IS operations.<sup>12</sup> US military efforts directly support the Iraqi

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<sup>8</sup> Audrey Kurth Cronin, "ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group: Why Counterterrorism Won't Stop the Latest Jihadist Threat," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 2 (April 2015), EBSCOhost (accessed February 27, 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Jerry Meyerle, "Is the Islamic State a Terrorist Group or an Insurgency?" *Defense One* (October 2014), <http://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2014/10/islamic-state-terrorist-group-or-insurgency/95765/> (accessed February 27, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Barack Obama, "The President's Statement on ISIS." Congressional Digest 93, no. 9 (November 2014).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Jared Keller, "The US Army is Deploying More Troops to Mosul," *Task and Purpose* (March 2017), <http://taskandpurpose.com/us-army-deploying-troops-mosul-isis/> (accessed March 27, 2017).

government, primarily through air, artillery, and intelligence support, special operations raids, and training programs, designed to rebuild Iraqi security forces. Unlike previous American interventions in Iraq or Afghanistan, the US counter-IS campaign is designed to achieve its military objectives at a relatively low economic and political cost.<sup>13</sup> This strategic approach, relying on partners to capture and hold territory, comes with risk. Though Iraqi and Kurdish forces will likely recapture major urban areas, such as Mosul and Raqqa, these non-Arab and Shia forces are also unlikely to militarily defeat the IS organization. Rather, IS will seek to repeat its survival strategy of 2007-11, when it pulled back from Iraqi cities, only to reemerge later in a more permissive environment. US counter-IS operations in Syria are further constrained by two other dilemmas: a lack of politically acceptable holding forces capable of denying IS territory; and American interests in Syria are not aligned with or supported by the Assad regime, whose priority remains regime survival and crushing Sunni opposition forces.

Even if IS is dismantled as a functioning network, other jihadist-entrepreneurs are ready to take its place. Whether under the IS banner or another label, Salafi-jihadist attacks will continue to limit both Iraqi and Syria's ability to reassert sovereignty and provide security and effective governance to their people.

### **Understanding the Nature of the Islamic State**

Defining the nature of IS remains controversial to many national security experts. More importantly, developing an effective strategy to “degrade and destroy” the

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<sup>13</sup> Steven Metz, “Will the Battle for Mosul Validate Obama’s Counter-Extremism Strategy,” *World Politics Review* (October 21, 2016):2, EBSCOhost (accessed January 3, 2017).

organization also remains contentious. Various counter-IS strategies have been suggested. Ideas range from implementing a containment strategy, to leveraging indigenous forces supported solely by airpower, to introducing US ground forces into the region. The feasibility of these strategies rests on how one conceptualizes IS.<sup>14</sup>

History is replete with multiple examples of Western powers misunderstanding the nature of their adversary, only to apply the wrong military strategy. For example, classic insurgents, such as the Viet Cong, tend to survive conventional wars of attrition. Terrorist groups, like al-Qaeda, that seek to intimidate populations, rather than win their support, tend to endure population-centric counterinsurgency campaigns.<sup>15</sup> Likewise, proto-states, such as Hezbollah, that derive power from controlled territory, can endure counterterrorism campaigns designed to degrade their senior leadership. Thus, understanding Islamic State's nature is the key to applying the correct strategy.

Islamic State's elusive nature defies simple analytical efforts, creating competing theories on how to defeat it. These different theories characterize IS either as a transnational terrorist organization, an insurgent group, or a proto-state. Like its predecessor, the Trump administration mistakes IS for a highly effective terrorist organization or simply an offspring of al-Qaeda. This misperception both conflates IS and al-Qaeda's similar ideology and common desire to establish a global caliphate, and ignores Islamic State's state-like ambition to control populations and territory.<sup>16</sup> As

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<sup>14</sup> Burak Kadercan, "What the ISIS Crisis Means for the Future of the Middle East," *Insight Turkey* 18, no 2 (Spring 2016): 68, <http://www.insightturkey.com/what-the-isis-crisis-means-for-the-future-of-the-middle-east/articles/10516> (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Gregory Miller, "On Winning Hearts and Minds: Key Conditions for Population-Centric COIN," *Small Wars Journal* (8 February 2016), <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/on-winning-hearts-and-minds-key-conditions-for-population-centric-coin> (accessed March 27, 2017).

<sup>16</sup> Kadercan, "What the ISIS Crisis Means for the Future of the Middle East," 68.

Audrey Cronin points out, though terror groups attack civilians for political ends, they do not hold territory, directly confront military forces, or attempt to expand their influence through effective governance.<sup>17</sup> IS is neither al-Qaeda, nor simply a hyper violent terrorist organization. Its source of strength is not its leadership or an ideology, but rather the broader regional sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia. Ultimately, applying a counterterrorism campaign against IS will likely prove ineffective.

Another misperception is to view IS as a revolutionary movement. Stathis Kalyvas defines revolutionary groups as organizations that seek to gain political power and “transform society in a deep and radical way, by profoundly rearranging social and political relations.”<sup>18</sup> Some experts view IS as a revolutionary movement focused on destroying the existing Middle East political order and replacing it with a medieval Islamic state based on Sharia law. Though IS clearly appears to have a revolutionary agenda, with efforts to implement a new social order upending the region’s political environment, it did not emerge out of a broad, popular movement supported across society.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, unlike historical revolutionary movements that enjoyed wide support and represented the aspirations of large portions of a population, such as Cuba, China, Russian, or Iran, IS does not possess a unifying message compatible with a mass movement.<sup>20</sup> Often a revolutionary group’s ideology, and the support of the people, is its source of power. IS does not seek popular support; rather, it seeks to dominate society

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<sup>17</sup> Cronin “ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group.”

<sup>18</sup> Kalyvas N. Stathis, “Is ISIS a Revolutionary Group and if Yes, What Are the Implications?” *Perspectives On Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (August 2015): 43, EBSCOhost (accessed February 27, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, “No, Professor Walt, ISIS Is Not a Revolutionary State,” *Muftah*, (October 2015), <http://muftah.org/no-professor-walt-isis-is-not-a-revolutionary-state/#.WKUE9bGZNBw> (accessed February 27, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

through brutal violence. Moreover, any counterrevolutionary strategy, based on contesting the will of the people or focused on discrediting Islamic State's ideology, will also likely prove ineffective.

Another competing theory is to view IS as an insurgent group. The US Joint Counterinsurgency Field Manual defines an insurgency as "the organized use of subversion and violence to seize, nullify, or challenge political control of a region."<sup>21</sup> An insurgency wages political war against the government for popular support and perceived legitimacy. This is counter to Islamic State's strategy. IS does not fight for popular support to control territory. In contrast to an insurgent model, IS purposefully controls local populations through suppression and brutality. IS seeks political control through violence and power, not through legitimacy or popular support. Consequently, a counterinsurgency strategy, fought over popular support, will likely also prove ineffective.

In contrast, Audrey Cronin argues IS is best understood as a breakaway territory from a weakened state. Cronin also claims that unlike most terror groups, IS can directly confront state military forces by holding territory and lines of communication with state-like self-sustaining income sources. Thus, Cronin contends that IS is actually a proto-state, with state-like military capabilities.<sup>22</sup>

Compared with al-Qaeda, IS mixes elements of soft power providing attractive government services, along with prioritizing significant effort into governance, administering territories, appointing governors, building roads, courts, hospitals, levying

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<sup>21</sup> U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, *Joint Counterinsurgency Field Manual*, Joint Publication 3-24 (Washington DC: Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2013): I-1.

<sup>22</sup> Cronin, "ISIS is Not a Terrorist Group."

taxes and controlling utilities.<sup>23</sup> But, unlike a normal state, IS is simply overlaying control over existing state functions.

IS is not the first extremist movement to combine violent acts with territorial control.<sup>24</sup> But unlike previous jihadist groups, IS has established a framework of a functioning state, through tax collection, and providing essential services.<sup>25</sup> The IS proto-state sustains power through a combination of political acumen, *takfiri* jihadism, brutal but effective governance, global recruiting, and a credible conventional combat capability.

In summary, because its nature is elusive and evolving, to understand the challenges posed by IS and apply the correct strategy to defeat it, one must examine the organization from a proto-state context, and more importantly, from the broader regional sectarian crisis that it arose from.<sup>26</sup>

### **Islamic State Functions and Purpose**

The source of Islamic State's identity is a unique tapestry of: jihadist ideology, marked by a willingness to use ritualist violence against its enemies and a desire to return the Muslim world to a pure form of Islam; the practice of *takfir*, which labels Shia rivals as nonbelievers, and condemns them to death, while cherry picking Islamic texts to purify

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<sup>23</sup> Alan R. King, "Islamic State: Redefining the World Stage," in *The New Islamic State: Ideology, Religion and Violent Extremism in the 21st Century* (Abingdon, Oxon: Ashgate Publishing, 2016), 83.

<sup>24</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "ISIS as Revolutionary State," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 6 (November 2015): 42, EBSCOhost (accessed February 27, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Mark Sedgwick, "IS in Syria," in *The New Islamic State: Ideology, Religion and Violent Extremism in the 21st Century* (Abingdon, Oxon: Ashgate Publishing, 2016), 93.

<sup>26</sup> Kadercan, "What the ISIS Crisis Means for the Future of the Middle East," 81.



its caliphate of foreign contaminants.<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, IS leaders hold an apocalyptic vision of their role in instigating a clash between true Muslims and non-believers.<sup>28</sup> This ideology is left intentionally vague, masking Islamic State's central purpose of exploiting sectarian conflict through violence and religious extremism, behind Islamic religious appeals to an idealized past.

Though other jihadist proto-states have been common over the last 25 years, such as the Taliban and al-Shabaab, Islamic State's attempts to overthrow the Middle East's political system and establish a global caliphate, while imposing its own version of Islamic political dominance, is unprecedented.<sup>29</sup> Defying regional powers by establishing a physical caliphate, and seizing control of large portions of Iraq and Syria, greatly enhanced IS's global influence, becoming what Byrnjar Lia describes as "a market leader in a competitive media driven jihadist world."<sup>30</sup> Also, by establishing a caliphate, IS mobilized an idealized vision of Islam's past, while leveraging disparate global jihadist motivations for material and psychological support.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the caliphate enhances central identity of IS as an uncorrupted form of Islam, that rejects Western influences.<sup>32</sup> This identity, packaged within a tech-savvy media landscape, resonates with potential recruits from a marginalized generation of Muslim youth.<sup>33</sup> This media-driven identity

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<sup>27</sup> Anthony Celso, "Zarqawi's Legacy: Al Qaeda's ISIS Renegade," *Mediterranean Quarterly*, 26, no. 2 (June 2015): 27, EBSCOhost (accessed January 2, 2017).

<sup>28</sup> International Crisis Group Report, "Exploiting Disorder: al-Qaeda and the Islamic State," (March 2016): 24, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/global/exploiting-disorder-al-qaeda-and-islamic-state> (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>29</sup> King, "Islamic State: Redefining the World Stage," 84.

<sup>30</sup> Brynjar Lia, "Understanding Jihadi Proto-States," *Perspectives On Terrorism* 9, no. 4 (August 2015): 31-36, EBSCOhost (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>31</sup> Sedgwick, "IS in Syria," 93.

<sup>32</sup> King, "Islamic State: Redefining the World Stage," 2.

<sup>33</sup> Tom Lansford, "Introduction: The Geography of the Islamic State," in *The New Islamic State: Ideology, Religion and Violent Extremism in the 21st Century* (Abingdon, Oxon: Ashgate Publishing, 2016), 5.

has also propelled IS as the world's leading jihadist voice, deepening its global revenue streams, rapidly expanded its external recruitment networks, and helped produce the largest influx of foreign fighters in recorded history.<sup>34</sup>

In summary, current US policy incorrectly views IS as a terror threat that must be defeated militarily within the broader GWOT framework. Moreover, this paper argues that IS is not the essential problem, but rather a manifestation of a larger more significant one, the Sunni-Shia divide. This Sunni-Shia violent strife results from the combination of weak governments pursuing sectarian policies and external state actors attempting to influence internal political factors for larger strategic ends. IS is both the result of this political environment and a manifestation of the essential problem, but not the problem itself.

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<sup>34</sup> Lia, "Understanding Jihadi Proto-States," 36.

## Chapter 2: Islamic State and the Sunni-Shia Divide

### Sunni-Shia Divide: Background and Reasons for Violence

The modern Arab-Persian conflict is rooted in three broad contentious issues: Islamic theological differences; religious competition to lead the global Muslim community; and geopolitical rivalries for regional hegemony. To understand how this Arab-Persian conflict affects geopolitics, one must examine the original schism over the Sunni-Shia shared faith.

In 656 AD, fourteen years after the death of Prophet Mohammad, an internal struggle over succession rights split the Muslim community into two major factions: Sunnis, who believe that any capable Muslim could lead the caliphate; and Shiites, who insist it is the exclusive right of the family of Mohammad to head the imamate.<sup>1</sup> Modern Sunni and Shia sects emerged from the debate between those who desired Abu Bakr, a companion of Mohammed, to be the first caliph, and others who favored Ali ibn Abi Talib, Mohammed's cousin and son-in-law. Years later when Ali succeeded Abu Bakr as the fourth caliph, he was assassinated by another *takfiri*-sect. Moreover, in 680 AD soldiers from the new Sunni caliph killed Ali's son, who was also the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad, creating the defining story for Shia victimhood.<sup>2</sup>

This 1400-year succession dispute is the foundation of modern Sunni-Shia political struggle for legitimacy as the leader of the world's Muslim community. Sunni

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<sup>1</sup> Philipp Holtmann, "A Primer to the Sunni-Shia Conflict," *Perspectives on Terrorism* (February 2014): 1, EBSCOhost (accessed January 2, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, "The Sunni-Shia Divide," (July 2014): 3, <http://www.cfr.org/peace-conflict-and-human-rights/sunni-shia-divide/p33207>, (accessed January 1, 2017).

caliphates and theology dominated the first nine centuries of Islamic rule, until the Safavid dynasty introduced Shia Islam as the state religion of Persia.<sup>3</sup> The conflicts that followed between the Persian imams and Arab caliphs shaped the modern political borders of the Middle East and influenced the distribution of current Islamic sects.<sup>4</sup>

Conflicts between Sunni-Shia groups were also common in the twentieth century. For example, Saud's conquest over the Hejaz tribe in 1920, which created the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, spawned levels of sectarian violence.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as Daniel Byman argues, although theological differences existed in past conflicts, these differences mattered little: "suspicion, discrimination and separation were prevalent, but for most of the last century Arab nationalism, power politics, ethnicity, and even regional and class divides were more important than religious affiliation."<sup>6</sup> Throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, both Iran and Saudi Arabia attempted to project a veneer of equality and national unity.<sup>7</sup> This dynamic changed with the twin rise of the Iranian Islamic Republic and the spread of Saudi sponsored Salafi-jihadism.

The political struggle between Saudi Arabia and Iran over regional hegemony is also not new. As Athina Tzemprin argues, this Arab-Persian rivalry is rooted in historic claims over the right to determine the future of the Gulf.<sup>8</sup> However, the 1979 Iranian revolution and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran was a watershed moment, that started an Arab-Persian cycle of divisive identity politics and state

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<sup>3</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, "The Sunni-Shia Divide," 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Byman, "Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East," *Survival* 56, no. 1 (February 2014): 83, EBSCOhost (accessed February 27, 2017).

<sup>6</sup> Byman, "Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East," 83.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>8</sup> Athina Tzemprin, "The Middle East Cold War: Iran-Saudi Arabia and the Way Ahead," *Croatian Political Science Review* 52, no. 4 (December 2015): 194, EBSCOhost (accessed January 2, 2017).

mobilized sectarianism to achieve national interests. This emergence of sectarianism was fueled by Ayatollah Khomeini's rhetoric, that openly challenged Saudi hegemony, and Iranian efforts to implement a pan-Islamic Middle East with Tehran as its guardian.<sup>9</sup> Article 11 of Iran's constitution reads: "All Muslims shall be considered as one single nation and the Islamic Republic of Iran shall make every endeavor to realize the political, economic and cultural unity of the world of Islam."<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Tehran began openly criticizing the Saudi monarch's legitimacy and stewardship of its Sunni community, while Khomeini urged all Muslims to embrace the Iranian revolution and overthrow "un-Islamic" states.<sup>11</sup> Deep-rooted Sunni fears of growing Iranian Shia dominance soon emerged. The Iranian rhetoric, signaling an intention to export the "Shia revolution" beyond its borders, only fueled Saudi's fears of a Persian crescent spreading throughout the Middle East.<sup>12</sup> These fears were confirmed, after Khomeini's appeal to Iraqi Shia to topple the Baathist regime led to an eight-year brutal war with Iraq, which widened the divide between Sunni and Shia.<sup>13</sup>

To counter this threat, Saudi leaders saw opportunity to contain Iranian expansion by encouraging the spread of the anti-Shia Salafi movement, which is an idealistic belief of Islam that applies a literalist Sunni interpretation of the Koran.<sup>14</sup> Before 1979, two Salafi trends generally existed: quietism, whose followers looked inward and avoided

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<sup>9</sup> Geneive Abdo, "The New Sectarianism: The Arab Uprisings and the Rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni Divide," *The Saban Center* (April 2013): 52, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/sunni-shia-abdo.pdf> (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Amos Peaslee, *Constitutions of Nations: vol II, Asia, Australia and Oceania*, (Dordrecht, Netherlands, 1985), 353.

<sup>11</sup> Tzemprin, "The Middle East Cold War," 194.

<sup>12</sup> Abdo, "The New Sectarianism," 52.

<sup>13</sup> Hilal Khashan, "Iran and the Arab World after the Nuclear Deal Rivalry and Engagement in a New Era," *Belfer Center* (August 2015): 60, [http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/project/77/iran\\_project.html](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/project/77/iran_project.html), (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Abdo, "The New Sectarianism," 6.

man-made politics; and jihadists, who accepted political violence to achieve their aims.<sup>15</sup> To counter the Iranian Revolution, Saudi leaders quietly funded Salafi mosques, madrasas, and radical clerics throughout the region, spreading its brand of anti-Shia Salafi Islam.<sup>16</sup> The fatwas issued by Saudi sponsored Salafist clerics reflected a deep hostility toward Iran and Shiism, while providing jihadist groups a religious mandate for sectarian violence.<sup>17</sup> These state-sponsored Salafists also claimed the religious authority to declare which minority sects were true Muslims.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, because the modern Salafist movement does not accept Shiism as Muslim, many Sunni Gulf states codified Shia sectarian discrimination, abuse, and violence as official policy.<sup>19</sup>

Sectarian dogma is also reflected in Wahhabism, the official version of Islam in Saudi Arabia, which embraces a concept of ‘othering’ to purify Islam from outside forms of deviations.<sup>20</sup> Naser Ghobedzdeh describes Wahhabist ‘othering’ as a conceptual framework which labels some groups or individuals as true believers, while advocating violence or death to all other non-believers.<sup>21</sup> Jihadist-entrepreneurs, such as IS, twist the puritanical and exclusive nature of the Salafi and Wahhabi theologies to create a legitimate religious pretext, and wage sectarian violence against their enemies. This othering has also become part of the state political-religious discourse, transforming

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<sup>15</sup> Abdo, “The New Sectarianism,” 6.

<sup>16</sup> Byman. “Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East,” 91.

<sup>17</sup> Aylin Noi Unver, “A Clash of Islamic Models,” *Hudson Institute* (July 2013), <http://www.hudson.org/research/9770-a-clash-of-islamic-models> (accessed January 2, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Abdo, “*The New Sectarianism*,” 7.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>20</sup> Ghobadzdeh, Naser, and Shahram Akbarzadeh, “Sectarianism and the Prevalence Of ‘Othering’ in Islamic Thought,” *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 4 (2015): 691, EBSCOhost (accessed January 2, 2017).

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 691.

regional statecraft on both sides of the Arab-Persian divide, by reinforcing Sunni-Shia mutual suspicion, discrimination, and hatred along religious fault lines.

Today, the survival of the Saudi monarchy depends on coopting radical anti-Shia Salafist clerics, whose puritanism and intolerance protects the Kingdom against the alternative Iranian Shia model.<sup>22</sup> However, this Saudi backed Salafist ideology spawned a wave of violent jihadists bent on replacing the monarchy with a puritanical caliphate. This environment creates a dilemma for Saudi Arabia, to balance countering Iran and accommodating homegrown Salafi-jihadists by using anti-Shia rhetoric, and sectarian policies, while containing the jihadist threat to the monarch.<sup>23</sup>

Similar to historical theological friction, the Iranian-Saudi competition to lead the world's Muslim community also fuels sectarianism. Both states embody radically different models of government. The Iranian model balances religious-political dominance with limited representative government.<sup>24</sup> In contrast, the Saudi monarchy attempts to depoliticize its religious leaders, while denying its people the basic principles of democracy.<sup>25</sup> However, both Saudi and Iranian political leaders leverage expedient identity politics and sectarian policies to advance their own national interests. Moreover, within these states, local institutional failures and identity politics disenfranchise minority sects and fuel sectarianism. Frederic Wehrey argues that “the dearth of inclusive, participatory structures; discrimination in key sectors like education, clerical establishments, and the security services; the absence of civil society; and uneven

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<sup>22</sup> Unver, “A Clash of Islamic Models.”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Frederic Wehrey, “The Roots and Future of Sectarianism in the Gulf,” *Middle East Political Science* (March 2014): 19, [http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/POMEPS\\_BriefBooklet28\\_Sectarianism\\_Web.pdf](http://pomeps.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/POMEPS_BriefBooklet28_Sectarianism_Web.pdf) (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

economic development are the real culprits of sectarianism.”<sup>26</sup> Wehrey adds that once minority groups are systemically deprived of economic and political capital they become susceptible to sectarian mobilization.<sup>27</sup>

Along with historic Sunni-Shia theological friction, religious competition, and geopolitical rivalry, post-2003 state collapse in Iraq and Syria greatly accelerated the spread of sectarianism. As David Byman explains, *takfiri*-jihadists promoting violence within a strong functioning state, typically end up in jail. Moreover, within strong governments, state security forces often monitor radical groups and investigate attacks after they occur. Even in brutal regimes, citizens are typically protected against non-state violence, while volatile non-government sponsored sectarianism is curbed. However, if an Arab government’s monopoly on violence weakens, the state’s ability to control sectarian violence is diminished. Similarly, state law enforcement capability typically withers as extremist group’s power grows. Consequently, communities turned to their own sect for protection. In the case of post-2003 Iraq, sectarian rhetoric and violence created a security dilemma for Sunni and Shia communities, which accelerated the arming of tribal groups and reinforced sectarian divisions. In 2012, when central order broke down in Iraq, tribes turned inward, further weakened the central government, and created a cycle of unregulated violence along sectarian lines.<sup>28</sup>

### **Aspects of Sub-State Political Conflict**

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<sup>26</sup> Wehrey, “The Roots and Future of Sectarianism in the Gulf,” 18.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Byman, “Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East,” 84.



Ultimately, the rise of IS is linked to external state actors creating intentional and unintentional outcomes, the US invasion of Iraq, and the civil war in Syria. However, the sub-state conditions that enabled IS to gain power can be understood through a lens of Iraqi Sunni tribal political exclusion and sectarian animosity.<sup>29</sup> Twin sectarian forces created a dangerous narrative of Sunni victimization: violent political prosecution under Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki; and the brutality of President Bashar al-Assad's regime.<sup>30</sup> Combined, these sectarian forces set the conditions for IS's growth across northern Iraq and large swaths of Syria.

After Saddam's Sunni regime fell in 2003, Iraq's Shia majority consolidated political power within the new Iraqi government. After a brief period of optimism and stability, by 2005 the Sunni-Shia divide moved to open civil war, over political power, religious violence, and tribal loyalties.<sup>31</sup> Though the American surge and Anbar Awakening brought a measure of peace to Iraq, by 2011 Maliki's sectarian policies isolated Sunni tribes, and other political rivals from national politics, creating a powerful narrative of Sunni victimization that proved catastrophic to long term Iraqi stability.<sup>32</sup> These tribal grievances marginalized Sunni leaders inclined to work across sects and discredited much of the non-jihadist Sunni opposition that gambled on working with the U.S during the Anbar Awakening.<sup>33</sup> Maliki's policies also created a sense of local disenfranchisement by separating the Sunni tribes from their national political

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<sup>29</sup> International Crisis Group Report, "Exploiting Disorder," 5.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Isaac Kfir, "Social Identity Group and Human Security: The Case of Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant," *Studies In Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 4 (April 2015): 238, EBSCOhost (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>32</sup> International Crisis Group Report, "Exploiting Disorder," 16.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 17.

leaders.<sup>34</sup> For example, after the US withdrawal in 2011, Maliki's government barred 500 Sunni political candidates and arrested hundreds of Awakening Council members leading the fight against AQI.<sup>35</sup> Furthermore, Baghdad stepped up sectarian violence against Sunnis, portraying Sunni tribal opposition as terrorists, while refusing to publically address Shiite violence.<sup>36</sup> As Iranian influence over Maliki's Shia administration grew in 2011, Maliki recklessly attacked moderate anti-AQI Sunni political leaders, who previously rejected the insurgency and embraced political discourse through Iraq's institutions.<sup>37</sup> Finally, by crushing peaceful Sunni protests in Falluja and Hawija, Maliki created a tipping point, pushing popular Sunni support toward violent Islamic movements.<sup>38</sup> By 2013, many Sunni tribes came to view ISI Sunni extremists as either protectors, or simply less-evil than the Shiite regime in Baghdad. David Kilcullen argues that Maliki's sectarian actions convinced many Sunnis that AQI had been right all along: "peaceful politics would never work, and that violence was key to survival."<sup>39</sup>

With hindsight, Syria was the ideal setting for sectarian conflict.<sup>40</sup> After succeeding his father Hafez in 2000, Bashar al-Assad faced a series of economic and social challenges that laid the groundwork for the 2011 uprising and the rise of sectarian conflict.<sup>41</sup> In 2005, Assad instituted a series of controversial economic and social reforms that both alienated Syrian Sunni peasants and weakened Hafez's old non-

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<sup>34</sup> International Crisis Group Report, "Exploiting Disorder," 17.

<sup>35</sup> Ted Carpenter, "A New Dictator?," *The National Interest* (January 2010) <http://nationalinterest.org/article/a-new-dictator-3355> (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>36</sup> International Crisis Group Report, "Exploiting Disorder," 17.

<sup>37</sup> David Kilcullen, *Blood Year: The Unraveling of Western Counterterrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016): 84.

<sup>38</sup> International Crisis Group Report, "Exploiting Disorder," 17.

<sup>39</sup> Kilcullen, *Blood Year*, 84.

<sup>40</sup> Byman, "Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East," 88.

<sup>41</sup> Christopher Phillips, "Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria," *Third World Quarterly* 36, no. 2 (February 2015): 366, EBSCOhost (accessed February 27, 2017).

sectarian social contract.<sup>42</sup> Assad's reforms had two lasting effects. First, the economic restructurings devastated the financial well-being of thousands of Sunni peasants, while protecting the minority Alawites. This increased Alawite-Sunni tension and drove many newly impoverished Sunnis into overcrowded slums, just as the Arab Spring spread throughout the region. Second, economic challenges reduced the effectiveness and the reach of Syrian state social institutions. By shrinking the social reach of the state, many Sunnis turned to tribal or other sectarian actors for redress of grievances.<sup>43</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch describes Assad's missteps as: "seeking to consolidate power within the regime he inherited, [Assad] unwittingly weakened [his] capacity to sustain power over society."<sup>44</sup>

In 2011, when an Arab Spring inspired political movement began in Damascus, protests were broad-based, secular, and largely non-violent.<sup>45</sup> Similar to movements within Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, ordinary Syrian citizens took to the streets demanding reform from a repressive regime.<sup>46</sup> At first, these groups spoke for inclusive rights and government reform, rather than for sectarian justice or grievance.<sup>47</sup> This non-sectarian culture can be traced back to Hafez al-Assad's rule and his political reliance on a small, minority Alawite support base. Hafez's regime encouraged Syrian Arab nationalism, while sectarian differences were officially dismissed.<sup>48</sup> Although Sunni-Shia sectarian

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<sup>42</sup> Phillips, *Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria*, 367.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 368.

<sup>44</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, "Syria: From 'Authoritarian Upgrading' to Revolution," *International Affairs* 88, no. 1 (January 2012): 99, EBSCOhost (accessed January 3, 2017).

<sup>45</sup> Kilcullen, *Blood Year*, 67.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>47</sup> Charles Glass, *Syria Burning: ISIS and the Death of the Arab Spring*, (New York, OR Books 2015): 24-25.

<sup>48</sup> Phillips, *Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria*, 366.

identity existed during this time, most Syrian groups accepted the regime's nationalist rhetoric for a mix of practical and ideological reasons.<sup>49</sup>

When faced with his own Arab Spring and demands for political reform, Assad was unwilling to either comprise or step down. Instead, he committed to crushing the uprising quickly. Using state security forces to attack residential areas and conduct a campaign of kidnapping and torture, Assad's regime rapidly escalated the violence towards civil war.<sup>50</sup> Seeking to avoid a similar fate of Egypt and Libya, Assad deliberately manipulated sectarian identities to retain his Shia support base. For example, as the initial protests began, Assad characterized the opposition, through state media, as sectarian Sunni Islamists.<sup>51</sup> As violence grew, this effort successfully tied most Shia and Alawite minority groups to Assad's regime, and forced most non-Sunnis to desert the opposition.<sup>52</sup> From the Sunni opposition's perspective, Assad's Shiite regime brutally ruled over the Sunni majority, while drawing on support from hated Shia powers. Sectarian lines were further drawn as other violent Gulf state sponsored sectarian actors emerged within the opposition groups.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, a surge of foreign fighters into Syria amplified Assad's claims that the opposition groups were Islamic conspirators and Sunni terrorists.<sup>54</sup> As Syrian government repression increased, peaceful protests faded and secular groups were marginalized.<sup>55</sup> In their place rose jihadist-entrepreneurs, such as IS.

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<sup>49</sup> Glass, *Syria burning*, 20-22.

<sup>50</sup> Kilcullen, *Blood Year*, 67.

<sup>51</sup> Phillips, *Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria*, 369.

<sup>52</sup> Glass, *Syria burning*, 96-101.

<sup>53</sup> Phillips, *Sectarianism and Conflict in Syria*, 369.

<sup>54</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and US Response*, Congressional Research Service, (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, May 2016): 10.

<sup>55</sup> Kilcullen, *Blood Year*, 69.

David Byman describes a formula that emerged from Iraq's post-2003 Sunni-Shia strife, and Syria's civil sectarian war. "As the peaceful opposition morphed into violent resistance," he notes, "the shift to sectarian strife was utterly predictable." Byman cites "insecurity, payback, outside manipulation and, above all, mobilization for war," leading to "the formation of sectarian-focused groups and their steady increase in strength."<sup>56</sup>

### **Islamic State Origins**

To understand the Islamic State, one must first appreciate the relationship between IS and al-Qaeda.<sup>57</sup> To many scholars, Abu Muab al-Zarqawi is considered the founder of IS. Prior to joining forces with al-Qaeda, Zarqawi's Jamaat al-Tawid wal-Jihad (JtJ) stood out from other Iraqi insurgent groups for two reasons. First, JtJ is credited with introducing suicide bombings and beheadings during the post-Saddam era of insurgent violence.<sup>58</sup> Second, Zarqawi's political goals were unique. Like most Sunni insurgent groups, JtJ sought to topple the interim Iraqi government, force a US withdrawal, and establish an Islamic State under Sharia Law.<sup>59</sup> However, unlike other insurgent groups, Zarqawi's unique interpretation of Wahhabi ideology held all Shia as apostate. By targeting Iraqi Shiite groups, Zarqawi hoped to eliminate a hated minority, while leveraging Sunni sectarian resentment against the Shia-led Iraqi government. By

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<sup>56</sup> Byman. "Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East", 88.

<sup>57</sup> Peter Dean, "IS and al-Qaeda," in *The New Islamic State: Ideology, Religion and Violent Extremism In The 21st Century* (Abingdon, Oxon: Ashgate Publishing, 2016), 61.

<sup>58</sup> Wayne Lesperance, "The Rise of the Islamic State," in *The New Islamic State: Ideology, Religion and Violent Extremism In The 21st Century* (Abingdon, Oxon: Ashgate Publishing, 2016), 17.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 17.

2005, Zarqawi's brutal tactics and growing fame endeared him to Bin Laden, and led JIJ to merge with al-Qaeda as its franchise in Iraq.<sup>60</sup>

Following Zarqawi's death in 2006, Omar al-Baghdadi briefly took over leadership of AQI, by this time known as Islamic State in Iraq (ISI). During this period, ISI suffered from eroding local Sunni support, and combined pressure from the American troop surge and Anbar awakening.<sup>61</sup> With its recruiting networks and freedom of movement degraded, ISI described itself as being in a state of "extraordinary crisis."<sup>62</sup> By 2010, Omar Baghdadi was killed, along with most of the ISI organizational leadership. With only 100 core members left, many US security experts considered ISI near complete defeat by the middle of 2010.<sup>63</sup>

### **Rise of the Islamic State**

The IS arose from three interrelated conditions: Prime Minister Nouri Maliki's failure to manage the Sunni-Shia divide; the chaos spawned by the Syrian civil war; and the US withdrawal from Iraq leaving behind a centralized, totalitarian, Shia-dominated state, which marginalized its minority Sunni population with repressive sectarian policies.<sup>64</sup> Following the US withdrawal, Maliki enjoyed new political freedom of action, purged his administration of Sunni political rivals, while targeting other Sunni minority groups using sectarian anti-terrorism laws.<sup>65</sup> Many Sunni political leaders were

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<sup>60</sup> Lesperance, "*The Rise of the Islamic State*," 19.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Christopher M. Blanchard and Carla E. Humud, "*The Islamic State and U.S. Policy*," Congressional Research Service (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, June 2016): 17.

<sup>64</sup> King, "Islamic State," 87.

<sup>65</sup> Tallha Abdulrazaq and Gareth Stansfield, "The Enemy Within: ISIS and the Conquest of Mosul," *Middle East Institute* 70, no. 4 (Autumn 2016): 527, EBSCOhost (accessed January 1, 2017).

forced from office, while the Iraqi government's use of sectarian violence against other Sunni tribal leaders increased. Maliki's policies reinforced a widely-held narrative of Sunni victimization, and disenfranchised large segments of Iraq's Sunni population.<sup>66</sup> When Sunni protest movements spread, in response to these arrests and abuse, the cycle of government repression increased. In June 2013, when demonstrations of Sunni civil disobedience erupted across Iraq, Maliki responded with lethal force.<sup>67</sup> The massacre of unarmed Sunni protesters by Iraqi Shia security forces in Hawija was a watershed moment, pushing many disillusioned Sunnis towards violent groups.<sup>68</sup> Many other Sunni tribes formed local militia forces that offered protection against the Shia government. When Anbar and Mosul Sunni tribes finally broke with Baghdad, IS capitalized on this discontent, co-opted these militias, and filled its ranks with new recruits and support from marginalized Sunnis.<sup>69</sup>

Popular dissatisfaction with Maliki was so pronounced that when IS overran Mosul, even politically aligned Kurdish and Sunni-Arab legislators denied Maliki's government expanded emergency powers. By the time Maliki resigned in 2014, Baghdad had lost control of its border with Syria, IS forces had overrun northern Iraq, and were threatening the outskirts of the capital.<sup>70</sup> By 2014, given Maliki's sectarian policies, many Sunni tribes viewed IS as a far lesser evil than the Shiite regime in Baghdad.<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Ali Khedery, "Iraq in Pieces," *Foreign Affairs* 94, no. 6 (November 2015), EBSCOhost (accessed February 28, 2017).

<sup>67</sup> Jamail Dahr, "Maliki's Iraq: Rape, Executions and Torture," *Al Jazeera* (March 2013), <http://www.aljazeera.com/humanrights/2013/03/201331883513244683.html> (accessed February 1, 2017)

<sup>68</sup> Abdulrazaq and Stansfield, "The Enemy Within," 527.

<sup>69</sup> Lesperance, "The Rise of the Islamic State," 24.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 16, 24.

<sup>71</sup> Robert Pauly, "The New Islamic State Conclusions," in *The New Islamic State: Ideology, Religion and Violent Extremism in the 21st Century* (Abingdon, Oxon: Ashgate Publishing, 2016), 214.

Seizing an opportunity in 2011, as the Assad regime weakened, IS moved into Syrian ungoverned spaces, and began expanding its political base and territorial control.<sup>72</sup> Islamic State's military strategy in Syria was to exploit sectarian division within the broad anti-Assad opposition, while seeking alliances within other Sunni tribal groups to expand its territory.<sup>73</sup> By 2013, the collapse of government control in northern Iraq, the Assad regime's instability, and weakened Syrian institutions, enabled IS to capture and hold significant territory with relative ease.<sup>74</sup>

Another way to view Islamic State's rise in Iraq and Syria is through the lens of social identity theory. This theory holds that social groups rely on three interconnected pillars to attract like-minded members: an insecure environment; a religious identity to bond the group; and a means to leverage individual self-interest against a common threat.<sup>75</sup> Issac Kfir argues that IS mastered the ability to attract Sunnis to its banner by creating, and then exploiting an insecure environment for Sunni tribes. Building on Zarqawi's anti-Shia ideology, IS used indiscriminate terror to highlight the state's inability to provide security, arguing that it alone has the power to protect Arab Sunnis. IS also leveraged the underpinnings of anti-Shia Salafi dogma as a highly effective bond, narrowing the marketplace of religion and identity, while claiming that if one follows its ideology security will follow. This powerful branding message resonated with many Iraqi Sunnis who resented the empowerment of Shia at their expense, along with Maliki's authoritarianism and closeness to the Iranian regime.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, IS leveraged this

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<sup>72</sup> Abdulrazaq and Stansfield, "The Enemy Within," 537.

<sup>73</sup> Sedgwick, "IS in Syria," 93.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 94.

<sup>75</sup> Kfir, "Social Identity Group and Human Security," 235.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 235, 240-241.



uncompromising religious interpretation to encourage acts of violence against non-Sunni groups.<sup>77</sup>

### **Islamic State Exacerbates Sub-State Sectarianism**

IS, by its nature, is incompatible with sectarian coexistence.<sup>78</sup> This is because, as Raymond Hinnebusch argues, “it seeks to impose [by force], its one true interpretation of Islam in the public sphere, demonizing those who do not comply as infidels, and embracing martyrdom for the cause.”<sup>79</sup> IS expanded its power by fueling sectarian tensions, first in Iraq, and later throughout the Middle East. Yet, Baghdadi did not create the Sunni-Shia divide, he simply exploited it. Or as Kadercan explains, Sunni-Shia sectarian violence was not the cause of the Iraqi and Syrian state collapse, but merely a consequence. Prior to 2003, Hazer al-Assad and Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regimes controlled their political domination over larger majority sects by effectively managing volatile Sunni-Shia sectarian tensions. When the US invasion toppled Saddam’s regime, unraveling state institutions and alienating millions of Iraqis, chaos and insecurity soon followed. Similarly, the Syrian civil war fragmented the country along sectarian lines, as tribes sought security among their own sects. Kadercan adds, “as political theorist Thomas Hobbes reminded us almost four centuries ago, in times of anarchy, people tend to coalesce around any identity or idea that might help them.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 240.

<sup>78</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, “The Sectarianization of the Middle East: Transnational Identity Wars and Competitive Interference,” (Hamburg Germany: Workshop Memo, 2016): 3.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>80</sup> Kadercan, “What the ISIS Crisis Means for the Future of the Middle East,” 77.

Throughout much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, sectarian identity was not a significant factor in Sunni-dominated Iraqi politics. As the dominant political group, Iraqi Sunnis did not see themselves as a distinct sect, nor did many perceive themselves to be victims based on their Sunni identity. Moreover, Arab identity, not sect, was the underpinning throughout the Levant. For example, the anti-Soviet jihad in Afghanistan was considered by many Arabs as an Islamic cause, rather than a Sunni one. In contrast, Iraqi Shia struggled for political inclusion under Saddam, and saw themselves as a distinct religious sect with a well-developed sense of Shia victimhood.<sup>81</sup>

Thus, the fall of Saddam's regime was perceived differently between the Sunni and Shia tribes. Shia regarded the downfall of the Ba'ath party as their salvation, while many Iraqi Sunnis lacked a sense of victimhood and held no desire to be rid of Saddam.<sup>82</sup> The reality of new identity politics initially disadvantaged Iraqi Sunnis for two reasons: Iraq is a majority Shia country; and a previous lack of Sunni political consciousness. Unsurprisingly, since the fall of Saddam, and the loss of political power, Iraqi Sunnis created a sectarian identity to compete within the new identity-based political system dominated by liberated Shia. Unfortunately, the most discernible feature of Sunni identity, though varied along a wide spectrum, is a sense of victimhood; spawned from a perceived post-2003 world order that exists at their expense.<sup>83</sup>

Both Sunnis and Shia consider themselves to be the prime victims of violence, and tragedy in post-2003 Iraq. A Sunni victimhood narrative competes for political capital, and entitlement alongside historic Shia grievances in what Ian Buruma calls "the

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<sup>81</sup> Fanar Haddad, "A Sectarian Awakening: Reinventing Sunni Identity in Iraq After 2003," *Hudson Institute* (August 2014): 4-5, EBSCOhost (accessed January 2, 2017).

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>83</sup> Haddad, "A Sectarian Awakening," 8, 9, 11.

Olympics of suffering.”<sup>84</sup> Many Iraqi Sunni political leaders exploited this victimhood narrative, blaming all violence against Sunni tribes on Iran, the Iraqi government, and Shia militias.<sup>85</sup>

Furthermore, in post-2003 Iraq, Maliki’s incompetence and sect-centric discriminatory policies validated many Iraqi Sunni prejudices and religious biases. Maliki’s sectarian policies drove a wedge between Sunnis still willing to work within the political system, and those who rejected it outright with sectarian violence. Moreover, many Sunnis rejected the legitimacy of the post-2003 Shia dominated state. This Sunni-state alienation nurtured a relationship between Sunni tribes and anti-state violent groups. Tragically, this also created a perpetual cycle of anti-state Sunni sentiment, feeding anti-state violence, which in turn resulted in further sect-centric discriminatory Shia governance.<sup>86</sup>

Identity based politics dominated post-2003 Iraq. For instance, in the 2014 Iraqi elections, many Sunni candidates campaigned solely on Sunni identity and Sunni victimhood, while arguing that Sunni Arabs faced an existential threat from the Shia-state government.<sup>87</sup> Many politicians on both sides of the Sunni-Shia divide competed for political capital, championing their “communities as victims of discrimination rather than attempting to heal national divisions.”<sup>88</sup> By preying on existing sect-based biases, these political leaders set the conditions for increased animosity and discredited voices pushing for reconciliation.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Haddad, “A Sectarian Awakening,” 12.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>86</sup> Haddad, “A Sectarian Awakening,” 14, 15, 16.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>88</sup> Byman, “Sectarianism Afflicts the New Middle East,” 85.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

Post-2003 Iraq and Syria also saw religious identities define the basis for individual and tribal security.<sup>90</sup> The cycle of violence between Iraqi Sunni and Shia is directly linked to divisive identity-based politics, and sectarian government oppression. Because the post-2003 Iraqi state became associated with Shia identity and governance, it became difficult to separate legitimate Sunni political opposition from anti-Shia rhetoric and sectarian violence. Consequently, just as many Shia Arabs conflated terrorism with Sunnism, many Arab Sunnis broadly connected Shia tribes with the US occupation and subjugation, Iranian authoritarianism, and Baghdad-sponsored sectarian oppression. Fanar Haddad argues, “the cycle of violence, mobilization, fear, and revenge that unfolded after 2003 created a reality of sectarian division that has been deepening ever since.”<sup>91</sup> This Shia-Sunni sectarian polarization created a breeding ground for IS to flourish.

IS has a long history of attacking Shia communities, based on a twisted-interpretation of Salafist dogma. Introduced by Zarqawi as a signature strategy, IS hyper anti-Shia violence is driven by ruthless political logic. By targeting Shia civilians, IS encourages harsh retaliatory sectarian violence against its own Sunni support base, creating an untenable Sunni position; where IS is all that stands in between Sunnis and the Shia-state repression.<sup>92</sup>

IS exacerbates regional sectarianism by promoting a violent *takfiri*-jihadist ideology. This ideology, summed up by its modern axiom: “conversion, subjugation or death”, is rooted in a rejectionist strain of Islamic thought, traced back to a distorted

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<sup>90</sup> Kfir, “Social Identity Group and Human Security,” 243.

<sup>91</sup> Haddad, “A Sectarian Awakening,” 24.

<sup>92</sup> Kilcullen, “Blood Year,” 33.

interpretation of Wahhabism and Salafism.<sup>93</sup> Many followers of Wahhabism embrace the practice of *takfir*, which permits one Muslim to condemn another as apostate, marking him for death. Similarly, Salafism calls for the return of a strict literal interpretation of Islam, based on 8<sup>th</sup> century practices, before the Muslim community was corrupted by Western influences. Likewise, IS leaders insist that Islam cannot be controlled by modern political structures or manmade governments, and they promote a strict adherence to Sharia law, while embracing ritualistic violence against all Muslims who do not subscribe to their strict brand of Islam.<sup>94</sup> IS combines this tortured interpretation of Wahhabism and Salafism, promoting a puritanical ideology that rejects Shiism and demands violent jihad against a wide collection of political enemies.<sup>95</sup> Consequently, the IS world view regards Shiism as an innovation, marking the world's 200 million Shia for death.<sup>96</sup> IS also considers the heads of every Muslim country as apostate for elevating manmade laws above the Koran.<sup>97</sup>

Ultimately IS rose from a resurgence of regional sectarianism, spawned by the US invasion of Iraq, and resultant Sunni-Shia civil war. Contrary to US efforts, Washington left behind a Shia dominated political system in Iraq, that institutionalized sectarianism. This failed state provided an ideal breeding ground for Salafi-jihadists to exacerbate sectarian violence for their own strategic ends, while enabling Iranian penetration into Iraqi domestic affairs.<sup>98</sup> Likewise, the Syrian civil war provided essential ungoverned

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<sup>93</sup> Sedgwick, "IS in Syria," 94.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>96</sup> Graeme Wood, "What ISIS Really Wants," *The Atlantic* (2015): 9, EBSCOhost (accessed January 1, 2017)

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>98</sup> Hinnebusch, "The Sectarianization of the Middle East," 3

space for IS to expand, but more importantly, provided Baghdadi an opportunity to shape the Syria-Iraq conflicts as a united Iranian-Western effort aimed against Sunni Arabs.

The IS narrative, that Shia apostate regimes in Baghdad and Damascus must be destroyed, resonated with tens-of-thousands of recruits throughout the world.

### **Chapter 3: Current US Response to Islamic State**

#### **Why an US Air Campaign and Military Advisors Are Unlikely to Solve This**

The current US military strategy is to degrade, and ultimately destroy IS by denying territory and targeting enemy senior leadership, while pursuing a Syrian political transition and Iraqi government reform. American political objectives are to maintain regional stability, secure strategic access to the region's economic resources, and to defeat violent extremist organizations. Additionally, the US government lines of effort are: providing air support, and military training to the Iraqi government and Kurdish forces; restricting the flow of foreign fighters; degrading IS's financing and funding; and mitigating humanitarian crises.<sup>1</sup> As of April 1, 2017, US and coalition forces have conducted more than 19,000 strikes against IS targets in Iraq and Syria.<sup>2</sup>

Though IS initially achieved strategic surprise and several early tactical victories, the capture of Mosul in 2014 appears to have been its high-water mark. Over the last two years, Kurdish forces, Iranian-backed Shia militias, and Iraqi security forces, aided by US air support, achieved modest success regaining lost territory in Iraq. As Iraqi forces attempt to retake Mosul, the current military momentum against IS is encouraging. Likewise, in Syria, local Kurdish forces made modest gains by pushing IS from several key cities and severing lines of communication connecting Raqqa and Mosul.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of State, "The Global Coalition to Counter ISIL," (2015) <http://www.state.gov/s/sect/index.htm>, (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> US Department of Defense, "Operation Inherent Resolve: Targeted Operations Against ISIS Terrorists," (2017) [https://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814\\_Inherent-Resolve](https://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve) (accessed April 1, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> US Department of State, "Country Report on Terrorism 2015," (2015): 6, EBSCOhost (accessed February 27, 2017).

Michele Flournoy argues that two theaters currently exist in the conflict with IS. The first theater includes northwestern Iraq, and eastern Syria. Here Kurdish forces, Iranian backed Shia militias, and Iraqi security forces, aided by US air support, achieved modest success regaining lost territory. Yet, because these gains come from non-Arab Kurdish and Shia forces, there are limits to the future effectiveness of these groups advancing or holding Sunni areas. The second theater is in western Syria where Assad's regime, allied with Russia, Iran, and other Shia militias, such as Hezbollah, is waging a brutal campaign against various Sunni opposition groups.<sup>4</sup> The composition of these Sunni opposition groups can be characterized as either non-jihadist, such as the Southern Front, or Salafi-jihadist groups, such as al-Nusra and IS.

IS still controls an estimated 8 million people in an area of Iraq and Syria the size of Maryland.<sup>5</sup> Yet, even if Islamic State's forces were militarily defeated, the current US strategy does not address the fact that sectarianism, and grievance lie at the heart of the conflict.<sup>6</sup> As a report from the International Crisis Group states: "today's strategy in Iraq [of] razing towns to defeat IS in the hope Sunni leaders in Baghdad can regain lost legitimacy through reconstruction – is unlikely either to meet Sunnis' grievances or create conditions in which they can forge a new political identity."<sup>7</sup>

Though the use of coalition military power to destroy IS forces and reclaim territory is critical, the main US strategic effort must be creating a political solution to

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<sup>4</sup> Michele Flournoy, "A Four-Point Strategy For Defeating The Islamic State," *The Washington Post* (July 2016), [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/a-four-point-strategy-for-defeating-the-islamic-state/2016/07/08/13ea5f1c-3e42-11e6-84e8-1580c7db5275\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.46649fabccfe](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/a-four-point-strategy-for-defeating-the-islamic-state/2016/07/08/13ea5f1c-3e42-11e6-84e8-1580c7db5275_story.html?utm_term=.46649fabccfe) (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Lesperance, "The Rise of the Islamic State," 16.

<sup>6</sup> International Crisis Group Report "Exploiting Disorder," 37.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 38.



return Sunni-Shia relations to non-violence. Airstrikes alone simply widen the sectarian divide, by amplifying the Sunni belief that the US deliberately strengthens Shia power at Sunni expense.<sup>8</sup> Nor will a strategy that relies on military destruction and future government reform prove effective without narrowing the gap between the Sunni political leadership and its constituents.<sup>9</sup>

Lastly, with little control over Iraq's Shia dominated security forces, Washington cannot influence how IS held areas are retaken. Consequently, different anti-IS Shia groups pursue separate agendas and objectives, often involving brutal reprisals against newly liberated Sunni communities.<sup>10</sup> Shortly after retaking Fallujah in 2015, videos emerged showing Shia militias beating and torturing Sunni civilians, with overlaid graphics depicting sectarian slurs.<sup>11</sup> These Shia reprisals fuel the sectarian environment that enabled IS to rise to power; ultimately setting the conditions for the next jihadist entrepreneur to take its place.<sup>12</sup>

### **Regional and Western Involvement: Views of the Conflict**

Future coalition military operations are likely to continue degrading Islamic State's hold on territory within Iraq and Syria. With its foreign fighter networks degraded through Turkey, IS faces significant challenges replacing its fielded forces in the near term. IS battlefield losses also will not prevent Baghdadi from seeking future

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<sup>8</sup> King, "Islamic State: Redefining the World Stage," 84.

<sup>9</sup> International Crisis Group Report, "Exploiting Disorder," 36.

<sup>10</sup> Joost Hiltermann, "The Perils of a Post-ISIS Iraq," *Foreign Policy* (September 2016): 3, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/22/the-perils-of-a-post-isis-iraq> (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Shiraz Maher, "The War Within Wars," *New Statesman* (June 2016): 39, <http://www.newstatesman.com/world/middle-east/2016/06/war-within-wars> (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Hiltermann, "The Perils of a Post-ISIS Iraq," 3.

Shia targets, to both exacerbate and exploit the Sunni-Shia divide. Consequently, Islamic State's sectarian attacks continue providing Iran a political opportunity to expand its influence in Iraq and Syria, which forces a counteraction by the Sunni Gulf states to limit Iranian influence.

In effect, IS is the focal point for all major regional actors. As long as IS exists, it will be a means for Shia influence, a justification for Gulf state proxy wars, and it will continue to threaten regional stability and US interests. Current US policy and military strategy fails to address the dynamic relationship between IS, Iranian expansion, and Gulf state counteraction.

IS casts a different light for different regional actors.<sup>13</sup> The West views IS primarily as a borderless terrorist organization threatening state sovereignty, and US interest.<sup>14</sup> In contrast, many US partners in the Middle East perceive IS only as a minor actor. These Gulf states prioritize fighting Sunni-Shia proxy wars, that represents far more strategically significant outcomes than the US recognizes. Likewise, US policy makers underestimate the strategic consequences of Saudi Arabia and Iran deliberately manipulating sectarian strife, and using sectarian proxy forces to achieve their own political aims. The resultant spread of sectarian power politics harden regional sectarian strife and violence by creating new sectarian identities among Sunni and Shia.<sup>15</sup> This phenomenon created an environment that enabled IS to expand.

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<sup>13</sup> Ross Harrison, "Defying Gravity: Working Towards a Regional Strategy for a Stable Middle East," *Middle East Institute* (May 2015): 37, <http://www.mideasti.org/content/article/defying-gravity-working-toward-regional-strategy-stable-middle-east> (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Haddad, "A Sectarian Awakening," 8-24.

## The Islamic State Conflict and Regional Proxy Wars

For millennia, nation states armed and funded proxies, such as rebels, warlords, and insurgent groups, to indirectly attack adversaries.<sup>16</sup> According to Michel Wyss, “proxy warfare distinguishes itself from other forms of warfare in that the principal actor chooses not to engage a target directly, i.e. by deploying his own forces.”<sup>17</sup> Modern proxy warfare, such as Vietnam and Afghanistan, were common during the US-Soviet Cold War. Similarly, the use of proxy forces along sectarian lines, characterizes a new Arab-Persian rivalry. Arab conservative monarchies attempt to contain growing Persian influence, while a newly empowered Iranian theocracy seeks to restore the Persian empire.<sup>18</sup> Since the Iranian revolution, where these Arab-Persian interests collide, such as in Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, proxy forces follow.

Iranian strategic objectives are to emerge as the Islamic world’s dominant power, eliminate the state of Israel, and expel the West from the region.<sup>19</sup> To accomplish this goal, Tehran aims to establish a contiguous line of pro-Iranian states between the Mediterranean and its western borders, while subverting Saudi interests.<sup>20</sup> By securing access to the Mediterranean, Tehran also achieves an entry point into the Israel-Arab conflict. Furthermore, Iran created a coalition of military and para-military forces,

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<sup>16</sup> Geraint Hughes, “Syria and the Perils of Proxy Warfare,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 25, no. 3 (May 2014): 1, EBSCOhost (accessed January 2, 2017).

<sup>17</sup> Michel Wyss, “Iranian Proxy Warfare in Iraq and Yemen,” *International Institute for Counter-Terrorism* (March 2016): 10, <https://www.ict.org.il/Article/1749/iranian-proxy-warfare-in-iraq-and-yemen> (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Ryan Curtis, “The New Arab Cold War and the Struggle for Syria,” *Middle East Research and Information Project* 42 (Spring 2012), [http://www.merip.org/mer/mer262/new-arab-cold-war-struggle-syria?utm\\_source=twitterfeed&utm\\_medium=twitter](http://www.merip.org/mer/mer262/new-arab-cold-war-struggle-syria?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter) (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> Jonathan Spyer, “Patterns of Subversion: Iranian Use of Proxies in the Middle East,” *MERIA Journal* 20, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 29, EBSCOhost (accessed January 2, 2017).

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

including Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi Shia militias, and Houthi forces, to achieve its national objectives.<sup>21</sup>

In contrast, Saudi Arabia's strategic objectives are to preserve the House of Saud as the regional hegemon, and recognized leader of the world's Sunni Muslims. Riyadh views Iran as the primary threat to its security, and power in the region. Moreover, the recent US-Iranian rapprochement gives rise to a fear of American strategic realignment towards Tehran, at Saudi expense. Saudi Arabia views Washington's 2016 decision to lift Iranian sanctions as an opportunity for Tehran to rebuild its economy, and expands its influence. Consequently, Riyadh increased its efforts to contain Iran's rise in the region, by replacing Assad with a Sunni government, and to minimize Shia influence within the Iraqi government.<sup>22</sup>

The Saudi-Iranian struggle for influence in the region is not new. However, two strategic shifts intensified this Arab-Persian rivalry: the fall of Saddam's regime in 2003, and the near-collapse of the Syrian regime after the Arab Spring in 2011.<sup>23</sup> From the Iranian perspective, this shift offered significant opportunities and challenges. First, the fall of Saddam's Sunni regime presented a unique opportunity for Tehran to create a reliable Shia partner on its western border, and to reduce Sunni and Western influence in the region.<sup>24</sup> By leveraging public support to Iraq's Shia majority community, and controlling the development of powerful Iraqi Shia militias, Iran secured political

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<sup>21</sup> Frederick Kagan, "Competing Visions for Syria and Iraq: The Myth Of An Anti-Isis Grand Coalition," *Institute for the Study of War* (January 2016): 22-26, <http://post.understandingwar.org/report/competing-visions-syria-and-iraq-myth-anti-isis-grand-coalition%20> (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-36.

<sup>23</sup> Helia Ighani, "Managing the Saudi-Iran Rivalry," *Council on Foreign Relations* (October, 2016): 2, <http://www.cfr.org/regional-security/managing-saudi-iran-rivalry/p38428> (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>24</sup> Matteo Legrenzi and Fred H. Lawson, "Iran and Its Neighbors Since 2003: New Dilemmas," *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 105, EBSCOhost (accessed January 2, 2017).

leverage within Maliki's government. Moreover, these Iranian-backed Shia militias operate as political-military entities, allowing Tehran to directly influence Iraqi policymaking.<sup>25</sup>

In contrast, Syria's Arab Spring inspired opposition groups posed a significant threat to Iran's regional goals. The alliance between Tehran and Damascus, based on common Shia identity, dates back 30 years.<sup>26</sup> This alliance allowed Iran to power project its influence into the Levant.<sup>27</sup> Consequently, Tehran is committed to preserving Assad's rule. From the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, Iran provided direct support to Assad's regime in the form of military aid, proxy forces, and financial assistance, while indirectly providing the full support of Hezbollah's armed forces to ensure Assad's survival.

Just as Iran saw opportunity after Saddam's fall, Riyadh attempted to seize an opportunity and replace Assad with a friendly Sunni ally and isolate Iran from the Levant.<sup>28</sup> In response, Iran intensified its own commitment to Assad, while both sides introduced proxy forces into the conflict.

By late 2011, as opposition resistance grew, the threat to Assad's regime became evident.<sup>29</sup> Seizing this opportunity, Sunni Gulf states began supporting various political, and military groups actively fighting Assad. Yet, the limitations of the Gulf state coalition became evident almost immediately after early attempts to form a representative Syrian opposition organization failed.<sup>30</sup> Moreover, inter-Sunni state rivalry, primarily

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<sup>25</sup> Spyer, "Patterns Of Subversion," 32.

<sup>26</sup> Tzemprin, "The Middle East Cold War," 194.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 196.

<sup>29</sup> Emile Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War," *Adelphi Series* 54, no. 447-448 (June 2014): 64, EBSCOhost (accessed January 2, 2017).

<sup>30</sup> Glass, "Syria Burning," 133.

between Saudi Arabia and Qatar, prevented the development of a politically unified opposition. Instead, disparate Gulf state support initiatives fragmented the Sunni rebellion into separate political factions.<sup>31</sup> More problematically, by 2012, anti-Saudi Salafi-jihadists began to dominate the rebellion.<sup>32</sup> However, the Gulf states incorrectly perceived these jihadists as unavoidable by-products of the conflict, who could be co-opted in the short term.<sup>33</sup> Ultimately, these Gulf state proxy forces failed to topple Assad, prolonged the conflict, and intensified the violence along sectarian lines.<sup>34</sup>

Compared with the Gulf states' fruitless attempts to oust Assad, Iran profited from its long history of proxy wars, and deep relationship with Hezbollah's Shia militia forces. From late 2011 through mid-2012, Iranian support to Assad gradually increased. First, through financial aid and logistics support, and later with indirect support through Shia-militias, Iran proved essential to Assad's survival. In contrast to the Gulf state's support to the opposition, Iran's "doctrine of asymmetric defense and long history of involvement in countries undergoing civil strife provided it with tactics and instruments that it could quickly deploy in the service of Assad."<sup>35</sup>

The sectarian conflict in Yemen provides another example of how a state can shape the characterization of a conflict, along sectarian lines, to achieve both internal political objects, and external national interest. The Saudi calculus to begin Operation Decisive Storm in 2015 stemmed from the growing Shia Houthi military threat in Yemen. By intervening to reinstate a pro-Saudi Sunni president, Riyadh could check Iranian

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<sup>31</sup> Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War," 68.

<sup>32</sup> Glass, *Syria Burning*, 91.

<sup>33</sup> Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War," 69.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 70-84.

<sup>35</sup> Hokayem, "Iran, the Gulf States and the Syrian Civil War," 81.

expansion towards the Suez Canal. But according to Fred Wehrey, there was an unstated domestic calculus behind the invasion. Operation Decisive Storm occurred when the Saudi government was under domestic pressure from influential Salafi Islamists, for its participation in the US-led counter IS campaign. By shaping the conflict against the Houthis as a fight against Shia authoritarianism, Riyadh bolstered domestic support for the ruling family and demonstrated how the monarch protects the region's Sunnis against its Shia enemy.<sup>36</sup>

IS benefits from these Arab-Persian proxy wars in two ways. First, because these proxy forces are aligned along sectarian lines, this reinforces Islamic State's anti-Shia narrative, and provides a powerful recruitment message, leveraging Sunni victimhood, that resonates with Sunni audiences. Also, the Iranian-Syrian alliance becomes an IS propaganda tool fueling the *takfiri*-jihadist message that all Shia are apostate and are thereby marked for death.

Second, for many US Gulf State partners, IS is not the primary strategic threat. Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Qatar, and UAE all view Iran's growing influence as a far greater threat to their national security compared to IS. By prioritizing regional Arab-Persian geopolitics over countering IS, the required political solutions to heal the Sunni-Shia divide are not explored. Moreover, when Iranian and Gulf state proxy forces fight each other, the resultant sectarian violence empowers IS, creating a cycle that cannot be solved with military force alone.

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<sup>36</sup> Wehrey, "The Iran deal sharpens the region's sectarian divide," 48, 49.

## **Chapter 4: Addressing the Sunni-Shia divide: An Indirect Approach to IS**

### **The Future of Arab-Persian Relations**

In July 2015, the West and Iran reached a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), limiting Tehran's nuclear ambitions in exchange for international sanctions relief. This agreement has significant implications to Arab-Persian regional security relations.<sup>1</sup> In the short term, by lifting the West's sanctions program, Iran will regain access to international financial institutions, direct foreign investments, and reintegrate into the world's oil markets. This will increase Iran's economic power relative to its Gulf state rivals. Consequently, this Iranian economic potential is problematic for Saudi Arabia, due to Riyadh's zero-sum, realist world view, where any Iranian economic gain comes at Saudi expense. Riyadh also perceives the JCPOA as the start of a US-Iranian rapprochement, diminishing Saudi influence, and defensive alliance with the West.

From the Gulf state perspective, Iran continues to sponsor the region's main conflict partners. Tehran's support of Assad's regime, and its ties to Shia militias in Iraq, convinces many Saudi leaders that Iranian actions only undermine Sunni interests.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, Iran faces a strategic crossroad. Tehran may choose to capitalize on its new sense of regional empowerment, and exploit new political momentum by further challenging Arab strategic interests through Iranian proxy forces.<sup>3</sup> This will undoubtedly

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<sup>1</sup> Payam Mohseni, "Views from the Arab World and Iranian Politics Post- Nuclear Deal," In "Iran and the Arab World after the Nuclear Deal Rivalry and Engagement in a New Era," *Belfer Center* (August 2015):1, [http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/project/77/iran\\_project.html](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/project/77/iran_project.html), (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Abdulaziz Sager, "Iran and the Arab World after the Nuclear Deal Rivalry and Engagement in a New Era," *Belfer Center* (August 2015):74, [http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/project/77/iran\\_project.html](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/project/77/iran_project.html), (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> Tamim Khallaf, "Regional Security after the Iran Nuclear Agreement," in "Iran and the Arab World after the Nuclear Deal Rivalry and Engagement in a New Era," *Belfer Center* (August 2015): 56, [http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/project/77/iran\\_project.html](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/project/77/iran_project.html) (accessed 1 January 2017).



increase the levels of violence within the ongoing regional proxy wars, and decrease regional stability. Alternatively, Tehran may choose to take constructive steps towards regional stability, and reduce previous intervention policies.<sup>4</sup>

Regardless of whether Iran uses its new economic power and regional influence to escalate existing regional proxy wars, or to normalize its foreign policies and moderate its actions, Arab-Persian regional competition and power rivalry will continue.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, without a fundamental change to the underpinnings of Saudi or Iranian state sponsored sectarian policies, identity based politics are likely to continue.

### **Post-Mosul and Raqqa Islamic State**

Two years after launching a brutal offensive, capturing wide swaths of Iraqi and Syrian territory and major urban areas, IS is on the defensive. According to many national security experts, IS is capable of rapidly transitioning from a position of relative strength to defensive operations, persevering for the long term.<sup>6</sup> In early 2017, it appears likely the combined weight of Iraqi security forces, Iranian-backed militias, Kurdish Peshmerga forces, and US military support will secure Mosul and ultimately Raqqa. Without these population centers, it is likely that IS will enter a period of consolidation, and seek to operate from sanctuary areas.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, IS already announced this contingency plan. Baghdadi views the *inhiyaz*, or retreat into the desert, as a temporary measure designed to prepare for a comeback, just

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<sup>4</sup> Sager, "Iran and the Arab World after the Nuclear Deal Rivalry and Engagement in a New Era," 74.

<sup>5</sup> Mohseni, "Views from the Arab World and Iranian Politics Post-Nuclear Deal," 11.

<sup>6</sup> Scott Jasper, "ISIS: An Adaptive Hybrid Threat in Transition," *Small War Journal* (October 2016): 1, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/isis-an-adaptive-hybrid-threat-in-transition> (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>7</sup> Jasper, "ISIS," 4.

as IS did in 2007 and 2013.<sup>8</sup> Using previous experience operating in Iraq's rural areas, IS seems likely to leverage the region's less governed areas as a base for this consolidation.<sup>9</sup> As demonstrated after the 2007 Anbar Awakening, to permanently defeat IS requires filling Iraqi and Syrian political and security vacuums.

### **How the Syrian Civil Wars Ends**

After steady territorial losses throughout 2016, the fall of Aleppo was a significant blow to the Syrian opposition. Aleppo provided non-jihadist opposition groups both a strategic foothold in Northern Syria, and credibility to expand their political base. The loss of Aleppo weakens an already fractured opposition, and diminishes any remaining hope for a negotiated settlement.<sup>10</sup>

The battle for Aleppo will not mark the end of the war. Rather, it will likely mark the beginning of a long-term asymmetric insurgency against the Assad regime. The Syrian regime's tactics, including collective punishment, siege warfare, and deliberate bombing of civilian targets, fuels the next cycle of perpetual Sunni-Shia violence. Critical support from Russia and Iranian backed Hezbollah also allows Assad to compensate for an eroding military force.<sup>11</sup> Despite its current momentum, significant manpower shortages will likely prevent Assad's military from consolidating further gains

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<sup>8</sup> Hassan, Hassan. "ISIS After Mosul," *New York Times* (24 October 2016): A 21.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Noah Bonsey "What Comes After the Bloody Battle for Aleppo?" *International Crisis Group* (December, 2016): 4, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/syria/what-comes-after-bloody-battle-aleppo> (accessed January 1, 2017).

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 4.

into eastern or southern Syria. Consequently, Assad's regime will not be capable of retaking significant Salafi-jihadist territory for the foreseeable future.

However, Assad's problem, and to an extent one shared by the US-led counter IS campaign, lies deeper than lost territory. For five years, Syrian Sunni communities suffered horrific violence at the hands of an Iranian-backed, Shia regime. This suffering created a new generation of Sunni hate and radicalization. Assad and the US cannot address this problem by regaining lost territory, or by militarily defeating IS.

### **Opportunities to Address Regional Sunni-Shia Conflict**

The existing challenges facing the Middle East, manifested in the current wave of *takfiri*-jihadists spreading chaos, and violence throughout Iraq and Syria, are formidable. Arab-Persian rivalry fueled the Syrian civil war and set the conditions for IS to seize wide swaths of territory. Moreover, the use of Gulf State and Iranian proxy forces in Yemen, Iraq and Syria exacerbate regional sectarian violence. Until the calculus in Tehran and Riyadh changes, US efforts to militarily defeat IS, improve regional stability, and diminish the cycle of sectarian violence will prove futile. Yet, several opportunities exist to change the strategic environment, and address the Sunni and Shia divide.

A significant driver of Sunni-Shia sectarianism lies within the trap Iran and Saudi Arabia laid for themselves. Khomeini's strategy to export the Shia revolution to Iran's Sunni neighbors created an existential threat to Saudi Arabia. The House of Saud's decision to counter this threat, by growing and exporting volatile anti-Shia Salafi-jihadist ideology, proved fatal to regional stability. These strategic decisions created a violent cycle of Arab-Persian sectarianism, and corrosive proxy wars that weakened fragile Gulf

state governments and produced a virulent strain of *takfiri*-jihadism that now threatens the entire region.

However, the post-JCPOA environment creates an opportunity for improved political relations between the West and Iran, which may lead to increased economic ties between Tehran, and its Sunni neighbors. Developing new economic interdependence may create a symbiotic relationship between Arab-Persian economic interests, and improved diplomatic relations.<sup>12</sup> Moreover, Iran and the Gulf States share other strategic interests, such as maritime security, a stable global economy, and regional security. The JCPOA may provide Iran, and the Gulf states a catalyst to spur greater regional cooperation, focused on common interests, to decrease sectarian tensions in the region. The US has an opportunity to leverage this political momentum by facilitating free trade negotiations between Iran, and smaller Gulf States, such as the UAE, Qatar, and Oman. As these commercial relationships grow, Riyadh's calculus may change drawing it closer to Iran economically.

US-Saudi relations remain critical to regional stability. Unfortunately, Saudi Arabia perceives the JCPOA as a sign that the US is abandoning its historic alliance with Riyadh, and moving towards Tehran. This perception may convince Riyadh to take more aggressive unilateral action in Yemen or Syria. Diplomatic efforts to return Sunni-Shia relations to nonviolent relations requires balancing Gulf state security needs with Iranian rapprochement. The Nixon administration struck this balance with a "two pillar policy" that maintained that both Iran and Saudi had an equal responsibility to maintain the

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<sup>12</sup> Khaled A. Beydoun, "Divesting from Sectarianism: Reimagining Relations Between Iran and the Arab Gulf States," *Journal of International Affairs* 69, no. 2 (Summer 2016): 48, EBSCOhost (accessed January 2, 2017).

region's economic wellbeing and security. Nixon's policy goals were to improve regional cooperation, through diplomatic engagement and bilateral security agreements, and to reduce the destructive nature of Arab-Persian power politics.<sup>13</sup> A new "two pillar policy" can shape the future of US-Saudi partnership, and develop mutual acceptable policy goals towards Iran.

Though Sunni-Shia sectarianism is the primary driver for the rise of IS, systemic failures within the Iraqi Shia government, that enabled a majority sect to centralize authoritative power over an oppressed minority, exacerbated sectarian grievances, and politically disenfranchised a generation of Iraqi Sunnis. Without offering a viable alternative to the security, and political opportunities IS offers, sect-reconciliation is unlikely.<sup>14</sup> Razing Mosul and Raqqa only to rebuild it with outside Shia leaders seems unlikely to address the underlying conditions that gave rise to IS. One solution to prevent future Iraqi government oppression of minority groups is to distribute power downwards to local communities through a federalist system of government.

The idea of federalism is not new to Iraq. The 2005 Iraqi constitution established a Kurdistan region as a separate entity within Iraq, granting Kurdish independent autonomy and political authority. Furthermore, this federalist system could be expanded to create a separate Sunni "state-let" within the Iraqi state. By offering minority groups political representation and local autonomy, Sunni Iraqis can maintain their own religious, and tribal identities through self-rule.<sup>15</sup> In 1971, the UAE adopted a similar

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<sup>13</sup> Beydoun, "Divesting from Sectarianism," 57.

<sup>14</sup> Dylan O'Driscoll, "U.S. Policy in Iraq: Searching for the Reverse Gear," *Middle East Policy* 23, no. 1 (Spring 2016): 34-36, EBSCOhost (accessed January 2, 2017).

<sup>15</sup> Mohammed Hammad Abed, "Why Iraq Needs a Federal System Such as the Federalism of the United States," *Al Anbar University: College of Law* (May 2014), EBSCOhost (accessed January 2, 2017).

federalist system. The founders of the UAE created a national government made up of seven separate and distinct emirates, each with its own identity and power, that coexist together to serve the people. The key challenge for the Iraqi state is to foster cross-sect social and political tolerance, while maintaining a common national identity for the whole country.<sup>16</sup> A federalist power sharing system accomplishes this by empowering minority tribes through separate, but equal, decentralized regional governments. Opportunities in Syria to address the cycle of sectarian-fueled violence are complicated by the large number of external state actors, with separate interests and objectives. However, the underlying conditions in Syria that allowed IS to grow, ungoverned space and brutal collective sectarian punishment, are unlikely to change until Assad, and the opposition reach a political agreement. This is problematic for many reasons, including Assad and his allies' reluctance to halt post-Aleppo momentum against the opposition, and the diminished presence of a credible non-jihadist opposition group to negotiate with the regime.

Though the mechanics of ending the Syrian civil war are beyond the scope of this thesis, it seems likely that the path forward includes the US, Iran, and Russia pursuing a combination of local cease fires, non-aggression confidence building agreements, followed by tentative political reconciliation efforts. In the long term, a new Syrian federalist government system, granting limited autonomy to Sunni areas, may ameliorate disenfranchised opposition groups with new political authority and security guaranties.

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<sup>16</sup> Ahmed Shaho Ghafur, "The Constitutional Structures of the Federalism in the Middle East," *Salahaddin University-Erbil* (August 2015): 391, <http://zancojournals.su.edu.krd/index.php/JAHS/article/view/946/536> (accessed January 1, 2017).

## **Chapter 5: Conclusion**

### **Understanding and Defining the Problem**

The current US counter-IS strategic approach focuses on defeating IS as a terrorist threat within the broader GWOT construct. However, this military-centric focus misses the key underlying political problem. The Arab-Persian rivalry fuels Sunni-Shia strife, enabled IS to rise, and remains the essential problem affecting regional stability. This Sunni-Shia sectarianism results from the combination of weak governments pursuing sectarian policies, and external state actors attempting to influence internal political factors, for larger strategic ends. IS is both the result of this political environment and a manifestation of the essential problem, but not the problem itself.

The US counter-IS strategy is also hobbled by different regional perspectives, and divergent political agendas. The West views IS as a borderless terrorist organization threatening state sovereignty, and US interests. In contrast, many US partners in the Middle East perceive IS only as a minor actor, and prioritize fighting Sunni-Shia proxy wars that represent far more strategically significant outcomes than the US recognizes. US policy makers also underestimate the strategic consequences of Saudi Arabia, and Iran deliberately manipulating sectarian strife, and using sectarian proxy forces to achieve their own political aims. Islamic State's sectarian attacks provide Iran a political opportunity to expand its influence in Iraq and Syria, which forces a counteraction by the Sunni Gulf states to counter Iranian influence.

In effect, IS is the focal point for all major regional actors. As long as IS exists, it will be a means for Shia influence, a justification for Gulf State proxy wars, and it will

continue to threaten regional stability. Moreover, the resultant sectarian violence created by Iranian interference, and Gulf state foreign policy hardened regional sectarian strife, creating new sectarian identities among Sunni and Shia, and set the ideal conditions for IS to expand. Current US policy, and military strategy fails to address this dynamic. IS will likely remain a regional threat until a political solution returns the Sunni-Shia divide to non-violent relations.

### **Addressing the Sunni-Shia Divide**

Though the use of coalition military power to degrade IS forces, and reclaim territory is critical, the main effort of the US counter-IS strategy must apply the following formula: increase state security, limit regional power interference, and encourage normalization of relations between sects. Post-2003 state security collapse, in Iraq and Syria, greatly accelerated the spread of sectarianism. Within strong governments, extremist group's activities and sectarian violence are typically curbed, providing essential security to citizens. In failed states, such as Iraq and Syria in 2011, as the government's monopoly on violence weakens, the state's ability to control sect-based violence is diminished. Consequently, communities turned to their own sect for protection. This creates a cycle of unregulated violence along sectarian lines. To break this cycle of sectarian violence, the US and its partners must find political and military solutions to enable essential citizen-security with Iraq and Syria.

Similarly, the US strategic approach must develop a new construct, using non-military instruments of national power, to prevent external regional powers from interfering with their neighbor's internal domestic affairs. Two examples of external



interference have profound consequences for regional stability. The first was Khomeini's decision to export the Shia revolution to Iran's Sunni neighbors. This created an existential threat to Saudi Arabia. Second, the House of Saud responded by exporting volatile anti-Shia Salafi-jihadist ideology to contain Iranian ambition. This external power interference created an uncontrollable cycle of Arab-Persian sectarianism, corrosive proxy wars that weakened fragile Gulf states governments, and produced a virulent strain of *takfiri*-jihadism that now threatens the region.

Lastly, the US and its regional partners must seek political and economic solutions to normalize Sunni-Shia relations. The JCPOA may provide a unique opportunity for Iranian-US rapprochement, and the development of new regional economic ties. The JCPOA also provides an opportunity for the US, its partners, and Iran to address other regional security issues, where mutual interests overlap. Through small gains in Arab-Persian regional cooperation, focused on common interests, the US may develop further opportunities to address sectarian policies that fuel the Sunni-Shia divide.

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## **Vita**

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